

EXCERPT FROM:

"VISUAL MUSIC AND FILM-AS-AN-ART
IN CALIFORNIA BEFORE 1950"

BY WM. MORITZ

32

with a color-organ rather than film, involved the subtle modulation of color from nearly invisible hints to blinding, saturated intensities; he also played upon the layering of colors, their rival push-pull effects and optical mixtures. These subtle details can hardly be captured on film, especially since the amount of light necessary for a good film exposure may exceed even the amount of light that may seem dazzling in its saturation during a live performance in a darkened room, which involves the complicity of the spectator's eye. In any case, the Bute-Nemeth film documentation shows that Dockum's MobilColor compositions involved simultaneous movement in three different directions, and an effective precision in the layering-- even if much of the color and nuance is lost.

Back in his studio in Altadena (the suburb of Los Angeles where James Whitney was born), Dockum set about building another MobilColor Projector, but at the time of his death in 1977, he had only had a chance to compose three pieces of some total 15 minutes playing time for his new instrument. Their serene luminous beauty cannot be seen without a twinge of regret-- and a scowl of anger that the Art World does not always support Art.

The end of World War II brought a flourish of activity to the experimental film and Visual Music scene-- so much so that an official MGM Studio memo to Jean Hersholt dated 14 May 1946, lists three venues for Art Cinema in Los Angeles: American Contemporary Gallery, The Great Film Society, and Paul Ballard's Film

Society.³⁰ Within a year there would be two more-- Creative Film Associates (run by Curtis Harrington and Kenneth Anger), and the Experimental Film Society (where Maya Deren and Sasha Hammid appeared for a screening of their films 13 April 1947)-- and following that yet three more: The Society of Cinema Arts (1948), Bob Chatterton's Film Society, and Raymond Rohauer's Film Society (which in 1950 would take over the Coronet Theatre [where Stan Brakhage worked as projectionist] and then in 1957 add the Riviera/Capri Theatre as full-time cinemas specializing in a repertory of experimental and art films.

In San Francisco, the first experimental film made was probably the surrealistic comedy The Potted Psalm, a collaboration between two writers, James Broughton and Sidney Peterson, who in 1946 were suffering from writer's block, and took to cinema as a recourse.³¹ Their film, an extremely visual surrealistic comedy, was premiered as the finale to Frank Stauffacher's first experimental film series at the San Francisco Museum of Art (which was essentially modern, since two other collections, the DeYoung Museum and the Legion of Honor contained the city's major historical painting collections).

Stauffacher's series of Art in Cinema festivals began October 1946 and extending through a sixth series in 1950. The initial 1946 series brought the Whitney brothers and Oskar Fischinger to San Francisco, which inspired two young painters, Jordan Belson and Harry Smith, to begin abstract filmmaking, and their subsequent distinguished careers helped to confirm a significant "California

School of Visual Music" (which also engendered a number of minor filmmakers such as Robert Howard, Hal McCormick, Elwood Decker, Ralph Luce, Leonard Tregillus, Dorsey Alexander, Martin Metal, Denver Sutton, and Curtis Opliger). Frank Stauffacher had sent Harry Smith to Los Angeles to talk Fischinger and the Whitneys into coming to San Francisco for the first Art in Cinema, and Smith was so smitten with their work that he began his own films immediately, drawing directly on film stock since he did not have a camera, animation stand, or optical printer. These first five hand-drawn films (including some footage he shot with Hy Hirsh's camera of lights at nighttime with the camera moving quickly past) were closely allied to the new Bop music, and were premiered at the subsequent Art in Cinema festivals accompanied by live jazz ensembles. Smith painted large abstract murals at the nightclub Bop City, and screened his film there as a "light show" accompanying such musicians as Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonius Monk. Jordan Belson has withdrawn his earliest films from the 1940s (which were greatly admired at that time), since after his spectacular Vortex Concerts of the late 1950s which synchronized electronic music with abstract imagery projected on a planetarium dome, and after an opportunity to see some of Wilfred's sensuous Lumia compositions, his films became more sophisticated and better expressed his spiritual aims.

Similarly, the presence of Maya Deren at Art in Cinema with her completed trilogy inspired a raft of new films in the "psychodrama" genre. In Northern California, Sidney Peterson and

James Broughton continued their filmmaking separately, and began to offer an experimental filmmaking course at California School of Fine Arts [now San Francisco Art Institute]. James Broughton's Mother's Day (1948) was particularly successful, capturing the ironic ambiguity between the adult's nostalgic remembrance of his childhood, and the detrimental influence of the sexual-social politics that are foisted upon children and mark them for life. Hy Hirsh worked on some "psychodramas" (Horror Dream and Clinic of Stumble, collaborations with Sidney Peterson) before turning to Visual Music after 1950, and Chester Kessler prepared a remarkable quasi-animated version of Kenneth Patchen's Journal of Albion Moonlight, entitled Plague Summer. Nor were all the new films "psychodramas": Frank Stauffacher, for example, produced three fine lyrical landscape films (or "city symphonies" as they were called following the German experimental filmmaker Walther Ruttmann) Sausalito, Zig Zag, and Notes on the Port of St. Francis. In Southern California, in addition to Kenneth Anger, Curtis Harrington and Gregory Markopoulos, painter Joseph Vogel made in 1947 All the News and House of Cards, for which he had the Whitney brothers optically print his paintings in the background behind a "psychodancer".

In 1941 in Pasadena (the Los Angeles suburb where the Whitney brothers worked) Sara Kathryn Arledge had begun an abstract dance film, Introspection, which involved dancers in black tights with only one body part in color so that against a black background it seemed as if arms or torsos or clusters of superimposed legs had

taken on a life of their own and could dance unconstrained by gravity. Unfortunately her lead dancer, Jim Mitchell (later a star of the American Ballet Theatre), was drafted into World War II, so she abandoned the project. Now living in San Francisco, Arledge was re-inspired by Art in Cinema, and she finished the film, which was premiered 2 May 1947 during the second series. She also published in the summer of 1947 a key critical article, "The Experimental Film: A New Art in Transition" which treats Fischinger, the Whitney brothers, Maya Deren and Charles Dockum in the context of the earlier Avant-Garde film.³² The program notes to Series One of the Art in Cinema, including invaluable statements by Deren, Fischinger, the Whitneys et. al, were also published as an art catalog by the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1947.³³ And also in 1947 film historian Lewis Jacobs published a substantial history of "Experimental Cinema in America" in the new journal Hollywood Quarterly [now Film Quarterly], which was reprinted in the British anthology Experiment in the Film in 1949.³⁴ A new American Experimental Film movement, heavily based in California, had come of age, and would flourish during the coming decades in the work of Christopher Maclaine, Bruce Conner, Bruce Baillie and Canyon Cinema, Gunvor Nelson, Robert Nelson, Chick Strand, Pat O'Neill and many others.

California Experimental Film and Visual Music clearly played a seminal role in inspiring a new "underground", "independent", "personal" and/or "avant-garde" film in New York and Europe. But another influence, which I have alluded to occasionally, may link